Communion Meditation
February 28, 1971 - First Sunday in Lent
Romans 5:1-5
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Have you ever been driving along a highway, and encountered a large roadside sign admonishing you to "Get Right With God?" How do you respond when you see such a sign? What do you feel inside? The assumption behind the message on the sign, of course, is that you are not now "right with God", and that you are clearly responsible for doing something about your predicament.

My educated guess is that while most of us do not spend much time reflecting on it, our immediate reaction is somewhat uncomfortable. I would guess that many of us consider, at least fleetingly, the possibility that the people who erect signs like that know something we don't know: that, perhaps - just perhaps, they're right.

Well, I'd like to say at the outset, that the people responsible for those signs, have not yet heard the Good News. And likewise, the people who feel uncomfortable, way down deep inside, when reading those signs, have not yet heard or understood the Good News. And that when they get together - the sign erectors and the ones who feel guilty - they are going to say and do things that make irrelevant everything that happened in the year 33 A.D., in the Roman Province of Judea.

The News is that we have been put right with God. The Goodness of the News is that signs like that are out of date, because something beautiful has already taken place. The Good News is that when asked "When and where were you saved," we may say "Two thousand years ago, on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem called Calvary." That is when it happened.

And that is precisely what St. Paul is saying in those five brief verses I read from his letter to the first century Christian Church in Rome. "We have been justified": we have been saved: we have been put right with God: however, we want to phrase it, Paul would have us grasp the fact that someone else has taken the initiative and done what was necessary to bridge the gap

between God and ourselves. It is already accomplished. The task is now to accept that fact, understand it, live with it, rejoice in it, celebrate it, shout it from the roof tops; in a word, to start living like men and women who have been put into a new relationship with God and each other.

If Paul had been a professor he might have said it this way: "You all have A's in the course: you have already passed with flying colors. Now let's get on with the job of learning the subject."

Carlisle Marney, a great preacher with a deep appreciation for the thought of the New Testament, in an address at Princeton Seminary, compared Paul to a wild horse, and went on to observe that for 2,000 years the Church has naively tried to reign him in, break him, domesticate him. Paul has this deep and magnificent hold on the grace and love of God: a sensitivity to the universality of this power: and appreciation for the breadth of divine activity begun in Jesus Christ. Paul takes an idea and drives it all the way home, and leaves us gasping in amazement. "God was in Christ, reconciling ALL men to himself." What do we make of that radical statement? All men. It is done. It has been accomplished. Or in Romans 5:1, "Now that we have been justified....." What do we make of that?

Marney was right. We've got to tame that a bit: reign Paul in: he's gone too far. That's too simple and too good. And so the Church, and we, put the bridle on and domesticate this wild theology. And the method we use is to attach conditions to the goodness of the Good News, until it no longer sounds good nor resembles anything in the New Testament.

You can be a Christian - if - you say the right words and do the right things. You can be saved - if - you join this particular church, in the manner prescribed here. You can get to heaven - if - you refrain from worldly activities. Those "if's" are the bridles we attach to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And we come out of it all - not even sure that we are Christians, let alone sure of our salvation.

Ask a group of Presbyterians sometime if they are Christians, and you'll get a lot of answers such as, "I don't know. I'm not sure. I don't feel like one. I'm not good enough. I'm trying." There is within mainline Protestantism a distinct lack of certainty, at a very crucial point. And it doesn't have to be there at all. To say "I'm trying to become a Christian" is to say, in effect, "Jesus Christ might just as well not have bothered: because if I'm ever going to be a Christian it will be because I've accomplished it, not because of something he did." Just a minor change in wording, however, makes all the difference in the world. "Yes, I am a Christian. I have been put right with God because of what Jesus Christ did. I'm trying now to live like the saved, reconciled, justified man that I am." That response means that the Good News is really Good, that Paul was right, and that the crucifixtion of Jesus Christ was no fluke.

There is another dimension to our problem with the Good News. I have addressed it before, but I continue to feel that it is at the heart of that peculiar Presbyterian ambiguity when it comes to affirming that we are Christians, now. Paul talked about "continuing in the peace with God, given by our Lord Jesus Christ," and "standing in the sphere of God's grace", and "God's love which is poured into our hearts." The tense of all of that is present, not future; today, not tomorrow.

The Long Range Planning Committee of the Synod of Indiana, of which I am a member, recently engaged in a lengthy discussion of the apparent "spiritlessness" in a lot of Presbyterian congregations. After we had dispersed with all the fancy theology we got around to asking ourselves a pretty fundamental question: "What does it mean to be committed to Jesus Christ? What does it feel like to be 'in Christ'." And we found ourselves stumbling. Not only couldn't we come up with words to describe our feelings, we weren't at all comfortable even asking the question.

Well, the words are there: words like peace and forgiveness and hope

and love. And we finally identified our dilemma as not being able to deal with those words in the present tense.

That, I believe, is a major problem for all of us. We are future-oriented. Our personal lives, to a great degree, may be described as always "banking for tomorrow". Waiting is the name of the game. Waiting for graduation, or adulthood, or marriage, or a good job, or the next raise, or for the children to leave home, or for vacation, or for retirement. And a life-time of today's slip by us; today's which are empty because we filled them up waiting for tomorrow.

I don't think I know anyone who does not need to learn how to live in, and enjoy, the present. I think there are very few of us who don't need to learn the grace of living this day for all it is worth; the grace of gratitude for this single day - this gift of the world and friends and family and life which is given to us, one day at a time.

And in matters religious, I think we need nothing so much as to confront the fact that whatever justification, or slavation, means, it is a reality that begins now, on this day, on every new day. For too long, and for too many people, the only hope offered by Christian faith, was a home in heaven after we finally stumble through this "vale of tears." But the real hope of the Gospel is that salvation begins now - here - in your life and mine: that it will be fulfilled gloriously one day; but that it is not just money on deposit - not something down the line somewhere, but a reality in which we have been given to participate - now. Because - God has already "poured out his love into our hearts." [T.E.V.]

So, together, we begin again the Season of Lent. And we begin by returning to basics; by recalling that in Jesus Christ God has done something new in the history of man: that God has brought His kingdom right into the midst of humanity: that His kingdom is a reality, here in the middle of this congregation: that we are bound to each other in a new relationship because

in Jesus Christ we have been forgiven and reconciled with God and made eternally safe.

We begin Lent with some affirmation about who we are: we have already told each other the cheerful news that we are forgiven: momentarily we will greet each other with the peace God has already given us. And then we will share a loaf and a cup, remembering that this body was broken, this blood shed, past tense; it has been done: for us.

Emil Brunner, a very sophisticated and scholarly theologian, said it in a simple way that cannot be improved.

> "We are not yet at home, but we are on our way ther and we know that we shall reach the goal, the only goal, which may be called the end, the glory of God, life eternal. The certainty that this goal is ours is our hope, and whoever has this hope is full of cheer, like someone on the point of taking possession of a rich inheritance." [p. 41, The Letter to the Romans]

Amen.

Our father, help us to overcome our hesitance to rejoice in the Gospel. Help us, our father, to receive the gift you have given, and to live in the goodness of the knowledge that you have made us safe - now, and forever. Through Jesus Christ our lord.

Amen.